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Localizing *The Daily Show*: The *heute show* in Germany

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Abstract

The recent success of the *heute show*, a German adaptation of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart,* on the one hand exemplifies how in this globalized age a foreign format can successfully be adapted to a country's own political, cultural, and journalistic context, even in a genre notoriously culture-bound as political satire. On the other hand this success story also illustrates how perceptions of political satire appear to have shifted in Germany, allowing for a greater degree of playfulness and thus attracting a new, younger audience to the genre, and, in the longer run, to a critical perspective on politics and media.

Keywords: news parody, political satire, German media and political culture

Localizing *The Daily Show*: The *heute show* in Germany

In a recent global poll Germans have been voted "the least funny nationality" (Casciato, 2011). Either blissfully unaware of this deficiency or in defiant protest, German viewers flock by the millions to the wide range of comedic programming offered on German television, in particular to made-for-Germany comedy formats. Whether viewers from abroad would find this fare funny and enjoyable is an open question, since even in this globalized age humor, and in particular political humor, remain culture-specific concepts.

Thus even though the history of German television programming is basically a history of the continuous import, adaptation, and sometimes export of television formats from and to different countries in the world, and in particular from the US and Great Britain, importing a political satire program poses great challenges. In this article we take a closer look at how the *heute show*, based on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, has been adapted to the German political, media, and journalistic culture, and how the local context and the foreign role model both inhibit and enable the political and social potential of this news parody format.

Academic (and public) interest in "Satire TV" has been blossoming in the US in recent years (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008; Baym, 2010, 2005; Gray, Jones, & Thompson, 2009; Jones, 2010; Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2009). In Germany comparable television formats have been discussed in innumerable master and diploma theses, but academic scholars have been hesitant to concern themselves with material on the fringes of the field of political communication. A few studies focus on the German tradition of political cabaret, but less prestigious forms of political satire have received virtually no attention (e.g. Rosenstein, 1994). The following article will attempt to break with this tradition and instead connect its analysis of the German localization of *The Daily Show* to the Anglo-Saxon academic debate on the political and social potential of satire television in all its variants. It shall thus illustrate how the *heute show* represents a shift in the German understanding of political satire, which in recent years has moved closer to the British/US tradition of political satire, making more

room for playfulness and laughter in the discussion of political failings. This in turn opens the genre for a new, younger audience for which it may prove to be the urgently required introduction to the realm of political public debate and contestation.

A German perspective on political satire

A commonly cited characterization by George A. Test (1991) ascribes four necessary elements to modern satire: aggression, play, laughter, and judgment (p. 14). Though some authors have suggested rewordings or additional traits, for example "required prior knowledge" on part of the audience (Caulfield, 2008, p. 9) in order to distinguish political satire from other forms of political humor, there appears to be a certain consensus on these key traits in the Anglo-Saxon academic discussion of satire. The German perspective, however, differs significantly – a difference that is even more striking as both scholarly traditions trace their understandings of satire back to the shared cultural heritage of the satirists of Ancient Greece. Still according to the main German satire theorist Jürgen Brummack (1971), satire is composed of attack, norm, and indirectness (p. 282).[1] While attack and aggression, judgment, and norm clearly relate to the same characteristics respectively, play as a stylistic device is replaced in the German definition by the far less "playful" indirectness, and laughter as a reaction to satire is missing completely. In the further discussion of indirectness as a stylistic device, laughter does play a role (cf. Behrmann, 2002), but it is not considered to be an essential part of the definition of satire.

This omission may in part be due to a greater reluctance of German scholars to be associated with seemingly non-serious phenomena, nevertheless it should not be taken as an indication that German satire is in fact humorless and does not entice laughter. Rather, it reflects the strong feeling of earnestness, seriousness, a sense of mission, and even cultural distinction which plays an important part in the German tradition of political satire, but may

[1] In German: "Angriff, Norm, Indirektheit." Authors' translation.

appear quite alien to the genre for foreign observers. This tradition was mainly formed by political cabaret shows which developed in the early 20th century. Originally these shows also included somewhat risqué numbers and musical show elements, but soon their main focus became biting social and political critique. While there exist comical-entertaining or artistic/aesthetical forms of German cabaret as well (cf. Budzinski & Hippen, 1996), the main implication of the German word "Kabarett" is hence "political satire": Small groups or single performers use a series of parodies, sketches, satire, political songs, and rants criticizing the current state of politics and society (usually from the left) to entertain, educate and mobilize their (usually rather select) audiences. Political cabaret requires a comparatively high level of political knowledge and can be quite paternalistic in tone, often transporting a sense of seriousness: "This is important!" "This is not fun!" "This is a serious problem that we are making fun of!"

With the introduction of television, this tradition of very "serious" political satire produced a strong tension between expectations of the performers, broadcasters, audiences and politicians which can be traced throughout the history of German television satire.

A Brief History of German Television Satire

Germans themselves may not be considered particularly humorous, but they have always cherished media comedy. When television was re-introduced to Germany in the 1950s as a public service institution, its charter included a mission to inform, educate, and entertain. Thus fortunately for fun-starved German viewers, entertainment and comedy programs were available from the start, long before the launch of commercial TV in the late 1980s. The position of political satire, however, has been much more contested.

1950s to 1980s: Political Satire as a Contested Rarity During the Duopoly of Public Television

For the first 30 years of its existence, German television consisted chiefly of two national public channels. While these provided plenty of entertainment programming, they were financed by licensing fees and could easily be put under pressure by politicians either through unofficial channels or through their supervising boards of governors, whose members were representatives of social and political groups, associations and parties, as well as the churches.[2] With the support of the German judicial system characterized by strong protections against libel and in general a conservative and paternalistic outlook, there was rather tight political control on what Germans were allowed to laugh *about*. Any form of political satire quickly came under scrutiny of the political establishment which displayed a strong will to control and sanitize humor in a new medium deemed extremely powerful (for a captivating summary see Behrmann, 2002; Rosenstein, 1994). In some cases this led to on-air censorship of particularly controversial acts, as well as television bans of certain cabaret artists. But more importantly it also led to the early demise of the two main attempts to establish made-for-television political satire programs. In 1963 the series *Hallo Nachbarn* ("Hello Neighbors") was introduced on the first channel, ARD.[3] Based on the BBC production *That Was the Week that Was*, it contained fake news, fake documentaries, and critical chansons. Mirroring the fate of its British role model, the show was discontinued in 1965 due to protests from both major parties. The second channel ZDF (an abbreviation of "Second German Television") launched in 1973 *Notizen aus der Provinz* ("Notes from the Periphery") consisting of satirical

[2] As regulation allowed only 20 minutes for commercials per channel and day, the channels were relatively independent from advertisers' pressure.

[3] The first German television channel is called Das Erste or ARD, an abbreviation of Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten der Bundesrepublik Deutschland ("Working Group of Public Broadcasting Stations in Germany"), which is an organization consisting of (currently) nine regional public broadcasters.

monologues as well as re-dubbed and re-edited news footage of politicians. Despite its overwhelming popularity – it reached audience shares of 45% – two of its episodes (on abortion and terrorism) never aired due to intervention "from above" and it was yanked in 1979 for siding too strongly with the political left (Budzinski & Hippen, 1996, p. 250). It was the last satirical format to air on ZDF for almost three decades.

ARD, however, had the structural advantage that its content was produced by regional affiliates, resulting in a rather diverse mixture of more conservative and more experimental programming. In particular, regional stations situated in traditionally left-wing federal states were more open to political satire, for instance the monthly satirical cabaret show *Scheibenwischer* ("windshield wiper") by the Berlin station of ARD. Modeled on the British *Not the 9 O'Clock News,* ARD also introduced *Rudis Tagesshow* in 1981. Produced for national distribution by the regional station Radio Bremen, the most-beloved entertainment host of the time Rudi Carrell presented fake news items and comedy sketches as a news anchor in a setting similar to the station's (and the nation's) most important newscast, *Tagesschau*. The show was extremely successful, but only rarely touched on political issues. Still it caused a noteworthy diplomatic scandal in 1987 with Iran in reaction to a sketch depicting veiled women throwing underwear at a figure implied to be Ayatollah Khomeini.

1980s-2000s: Political Satire Replaced by the Comedy Boom as Commercial Television is Established

By the time commercial television was introduced in the mid-1980s, political satire had been relegated to the regional public service channels which made use of their position somewhat secluded from national scrutiny to provide room for political cabaret acts and to develop a number of rather edgy and unique satirical shows (which met a quick demise whenever they were promoted to national distribution on the main channel of ARD due to a mixture of increased scrutiny and political pressure as well as a failure to attract a larger audience).

While commercial channels did make an effort (and in part succeeded) to scratch at the monopoly of public channels on political information by producing regular newscasts as well as political talk-shows and magazines, for comedic programs they steered clear of politically charged formats. Looking predominantly to the US for inspiration, they introduced the concept of "stand-up comedians" to the German audience and a number of comedy shows such as *RTL Samstag Nacht* (1993-1998, inspired by *Saturday Night Live*), *Freitag Nacht News* (1999-2006, also RTL), the *Wochenshow* (1996-2002, Sat.1 – relaunched in June 2011), or *Switch* (ProSieben, 1997-2000, on air again as *Switch – Reloaded* since 2007).

All of these contained, among other things, parodies of newscasts and used clips of politicians in their sketches. However, it was always the fame and publicity that made politicians an easy target for parody and satire, not the political content of their statements. An exception has been the first successful German late night show host, Harald Schmidt, who started out on the commercial channel Sat.1 in 1995 with a nearly identical adaptation of the *Late Show with David Letterman.* In time the show developed a distinctly German profile, playing to the almost pathological need for cultural distinction of the German bourgeoisie, for instance, one episode presented entirely in French and another crafted as a reenactment of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* using Playmobil figurines. But part of its appeal to German media critics and the intelligentsia lay in the acerbic political wit of Schmidt's stand-up routine at the beginning of each show. Nevertheless over the years and many changes in format and even distributing channel, the show lost much of its political drive and impact. And the host of the other longtime successful late night show in Germany, Stefan Raab, never had any political ambitions with his format *TV Total* on ProSieben (since 1999).

Late 2000s: The Re-Politicization of Television Comedy?

In 2007, public channel ZDF decided to end its almost 30-year hiatus from political satire and introduced *Neues aus der Anstalt* ("News from the (Mental) Institution") where two regular

and several guest comedians take turns dissecting political issues. In 2009 it added the *heute show*, and in 2011 another politically satirical talk show to its roster. Whether this program re-orientation is part of a larger trend toward a re-politicization of television comedy still remains to be seen. So far the *heute show* has been attributed with revitalizing the genre of political satire, while media critics claim that the longtime late night show host Harald Schmidt has been revived by the competition (e.g. Brauck, 2009). The relaunch of the weekly parody format *Wochenshow* on Sat.1 in June 2011 may also have been inspired by the success of Welke and his team. Nevertheless, political satire currently remains limited to the three ZDF shows and the regional public broadcasters, commercial stations continue to make Germans laugh about everything but politics.

A Lighter Take on Political Satire? Introducing the *heute show* to Germany

ZDF, the second largest national German public channel, started its new foray into news parody rather tentatively in 2009 with two pilot episodes of the *heute show* on May 26 and June 23, followed by a first season of monthly episodes from September 8 to December 30 the same year. With growing confidence, the show started its second season with a weekly slot on Friday night around 11 p.m., the exact time depending on preceding programs. To keep fans interested during the summer break, weekly mini news updates (called *heute show spezial* [2009] and *heute show xxs* [2011]) have been presented by one of the show's fake correspondents and broadcast on the web, and in 2011 also nationally on ZDFinfo, ZDF's cable news channel.

But why would a large public broadcaster primarily associated with Volksmusik shows and high-budget adaptations of Rosamunde Pilcher novels take the risk to invest in a news parody format likely to offend quite a number of its core viewers? The main reason is that the two national public channels (and their large portfolios of regional and special interest channels) are facing mounting public pressure questioning the stations' reliance on licensing

fees, in particular as their audience shares are continuously declining. In 2010 both channels finally fell behind the main commercial competitor RTL (Zubayr & Gerhard, 2011). At the same time they are having trouble attracting a younger audience. The average viewer of ZDF is 61 years old, compared to the 46 years for RTL viewers (AGF/GfK, 2011). Programming the *heute show* has thus been a strategic decision to appeal to younger viewers through intelligent, sophisticated political satire, and at the same time to underline the "public value" of the channel.

This "public value," however, has only recently been recognized by broadcasters as well as politicians. They have noticed the increasing relevance of satirical news shows such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* in the US – both of which are available online in Germany. A weekly summary of highlights from *The Daily Show* is also shown on German cable TV. Broadcasters and politicians have taken particular note of how, in the US, those shows have managed to reach the growing demographic of politically disinterested citizens. This is relevant for Germany, which has seen a decline in party membership and voter turnout over the last decades.[4] Thus while politicians and public broadcasters still retain some reservations concerning the potentially disruptive or alienating effects of political satire, these are beginning to be overruled by the need to reach the segments of society which have been alienated by the traditional coverage of politics in the news, and which at the same time are quite familiar with the satirical news programs in the US.

[4] While party membership increased after World War II until the 1970s, it has been on a steady decline since then, decreasing from 2 million members of political parties in Western Germany (of a population of 61 million) in the mid-70s to 1.4 million in 2009 (population 82 million) (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2009; Gabriel/Völkl, 2005). The same is true for voter participation: Numbers went up between 1949 and 1972 from 78.5% to 91.1% in national elections, before declining again to 70.8% in 2009 (http://www.bundeswahlleiter.de).

As a result of this, ZDF's director has been very supportive of the show. When, after a promising start, audience response fell below expectations during the first season, the show was still allowed time to develop its own voice and audience niche. Whenever the show caused political controversy or ran into legal troubles, the channel's management issued a formal reprimand, but it never questioned the value or the existence of the show itself. Moreover the show was allowed to model itself as closely as possible on the main newscast of ZDF which is called *heute* ("today") – the title *heute show* is thus both a play on *The Daily Show* and the main regular newscast. Furthermore it could integrate other important aspects of the channel brand such as the *Mainzelmännchen*, cartoon figures ZDF has been using since 1963 and whose appearances in the *heute show* are often not exactly G-rated. This represents a clear break from former channel guidelines according to which political satire had to be clearly labeled to protect the audience from misunderstandings. At the same time their very imaginative use is an excellent illustration of the new level of playfulness of political satire demonstrated by the *heute show*: Until recently these cartoon figures would have been considered too childish to illustrate political points, but now they can kill off Bin Laden as part of a doorbell prank.

The show is so closely associated with the channel that in its current format, it could not be broadcast on any other station. This may hinder its effort to connect to a younger audience, given ZDF's image as the retired people's channel. However, this association with a national channel greatly increases the show's credibility as "serious" political satire. Despite a clear convergence in program content and styles, German viewers still associate the public channels more strongly with well-researched, fact-orientated journalism (Zubayr & Geese, 2011). In addition, the majority of politicians and people on the street will be far more likely to talk to a journalist with a ZDF microphone than one from a commercial station.

Localizing the *heute show* in German Media Culture

Formally, the *heute show* is a very close adaptation of the US original *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, from the studio furnishings to the composition of each episode (with the important exception that until recently there were no interviews with "real" politicians or experts). A show usually lasts 30 minutes, without commercial breaks, since these are not allowed on public broadcasting in Germany after 8 p.m. The program starts with an introductory jingle modeled from regular newscasts, and then the camera moves into the studio to focus on the anchor Oliver Welke at his desk.

CAPTION: The anchor presents selected news of the week accompanied by illustrations and word plays, adding a humorous touch to the story. In this case, along with the news of the killing of Osama Bin Laden, President Obama is shown as "Schützenkönig" ("King of Marksmen").

After a brief introduction, Welke typically proceeds to discuss approximately five topics chosen for the episode. Each topic is illustrated with a symbol photo or graphic, usually with a funny word play, or a montage of photos and graphic elements, in the background. The topic is then presented in a mixture of actual reporting of the facts and ironic and humorous comments. Often, snippets of regular TV news programs are used, sometimes consisting only

of single words. The fast montage of these snippets turns statements of politicians or other public figures into pointless repetitions of talking points or absurd contradictions. The anchorman not only presents the news, but also reacts to the humor or the absurdity of it with comments or simply his mimics. The whole presentation of news, including mimics and expressions of astonishment and disbelief, is done in the same style as Jon Stewart's presentation of the news (e.g. Baym, 2005; Jones 2010).

The anchor himself may not be as central to the *heute show* as Jon Stewart is to *The Daily Show*, but Oliver Welke is the face of the show, and he also serves as its spokesperson. As he is already well known to the German TV audience as presenter of various other TV shows, mainly sports and comedy shows, and still works as a presenter/commentator of key soccer games for a commercial German broadcaster, he provides an easy entry point into the world of political satire. In violation of the still-prevailing image of political cabaret artists, he does not appear to be particularly intellectual, politically aggressive, or self-righteous. He is the guy who used to talk to you about soccer and other fun things, and now offers his views on political issues in a similarly unpretentious manner. This is aided by the fact that in contrast to Jon Stewart and to the rest of the *heute show* staff, Welke has not developed a noticeable role or persona; he appears (and is perceived by the audience) as "himself."

As on *The Daily Show*, many of the topics are also covered by reports from fake correspondents or fake experts in the studio. These are played by well-known comedians using a pseudonym. While the use of fake correspondents/experts in general has been modeled on *The Daily Show* (and other US formats), their personas have been adapted completely to German media and journalistic culture. The senior, disgruntled, and jaded foreign correspondent is probably the figure most accessible to non-German viewers; the others are all very much embedded in German culture. There is the fastidious, but pointless statistics expert (as a general critique of the inherently German fixation on numbers and statistics), the typical East German (easily identifiable by his poor taste in clothing, his Saxon

accent, and his air of whiny resignation and disaffection), the admiring supporter of Chancellor Merkel, and the Turkish reporter (representing the largest group of immigrants in Germany).

In general, the *heute show* is embedded in German media culture, drawing inspiration for its jokes from a broad range of cultural phenomena. Some of its humor requires an intimate knowledge of German (media) history, for example by playing with headlines and magazine covers that have gained an iconic status, such as the first cover of the German satire magazine *Titanic* after the German reunification. For the generation 30 and older, it holds sometimes a nostalgic appeal. Due to the 30 years of public television duopoly, most Germans share memories of important television events that had audience shares of 60% or higher. Thus when the *heute show* uses popular entertainment shows from the German past as props – such as *Der große Preis* (1974-2003) or *Wetten dass…* (the number-one Saturday night family show on German television since 1981) – it taps into this sense of common cultural history. However this also makes it a distinctly *West* German format. Many of its cultural references can only be understood with a West German (media) background, and the caricature of an East-German as a pseudo-correspondent also appeals more to West Germans.

The *heute show* and German Journalistic Culture

Hallin & Manicini (2004) characterized German journalistic culture as more partisan than that of the US, but recent developments in the American media appear to suggest otherwise. So far nothing remotely comparable to US talk radio or *Fox News* has developed in Germany. National newspapers exhibit some political leanings ranging from the left (*tageszeitung*) to the right (*Die Welt*), but none of them openly promote specific parties or candidates, not even the right-leaning tabloid *Bild*. In particular on television and radio, most programs and their journalists subscribe to a doctrine of fairness and civility that is due, in part, to the regulations governing public stations (and with less strictness, also the commercial channels). Given the

absence of any controversial media pundits, the *heute show* is thus left with decidedly less provoking material to dissect or a distinct target for its media critique.

In absence of a divided, partisan media landscape, the show criticizes in general the inadequate, sensationalized, and personalized reporting in German media by exaggerating exactly these aspects, either through a montage of clips from regular news shows, or by parodies of regular news elements. It also attacks the downside of this doctrine of fairness and civility - a blandness and artificial, disengaging neutrality. Exemplary for this critique is the regular segment featuring commentator Gernot Hassknecht, played by the actor Hans-Joachim Heist. He delivers editorial comment on current topics, a format German viewers are familiar with, since, for important issues, chief-editors or directors of regional TV subsidiaries regularly deliver comment as part of the regular newscast on the national public stations. These comments are formally separated from the presentation of the daily news through the elaborate measures taken to ensure that viewers do not mistake them for "real" news. They are introduced formally by the news anchor "And now a commentary from regional station chief XX", and then presented in front of a different backdrop and with the insert "comment by XX", while a (not particularly aggressive or opinionated) comment is read in a rather neutral, distant voice. In his parody, Hassknecht starts his comment with a balanced report on the facts of an issue, but then talks himself into a flaming rage (much like *The Daily Show*'s Lewis Black in "Back in Black"), until he is cut off by a still frame of the channel's logo, with comforting music indicating a short interruption in the program.

There are stronger forms of political commentary in the German media, but they are more likely to be found in niche outlets such as the political satire print magazines *Eulenspiegel* and *Titanic* (both with a circulation of about 100,000). In particular *Titanic* has created quite a few political scandals and a number of iconic covers and headlines that found their way into mainstream media reporting and popular culture. The *heute show* thus gained significant political credibility by adding the former chief-editor of *Titanic* to its staff. Martin

Sonneborn regularly takes on "interview missions" where he ventures with his trademark earnestness into terrain mostly ignored by regular journalists. He interviews neo-Nazi extremists and members of the Marxist Forum (the openly Marxist wing of a small left wing political party), he portrays a Santa Claus workshop as a terrorist training camp, and he intrudes in the houses of simple citizens claiming the need to film their homes for the new service "Google Home View."

Sonneborn represents a more controversial, polarizing approach to journalism, which can be seen as a reaction to the well-mannered, well-balanced media culture in Germany. He also caused the only legal case surrounding the *heute show* so far when he interviewed a pharma lobbyist in 2010 about the price of drugs in Germany, pretending to be from ZDF's regular newscast *heute*. In the interview, the lobbyist made statements about the quality of drugs from Chinese pharmaceutical companies, but then said he didn't want to be shown on TV. Nevertheless, the segment was used by the *heute show*. As a result, the lobbyist lost his job, and Sonneborn and the *heute show* were reprimanded by the head of ZDF. However, in an interview, Welke pointed out that his show had shown the mechanisms of lobbying in a new light, stressing that this kind of background information should be shown on regular TV news but isn't (Leurs, 2011). He thus sees his show as a form of criticism of the regular news programs on TV, a standpoint he shares with his American role model Jon Stewart.

The *heute show* and German Political Culture

In a parliamentary democracy with currently five elected political parties (and 16 federal states clamoring for their share of the public debate), developing a news parody program that covers all relevant political actors and issues, while at the same time providing its viewers with a restricted range of recognizable, easy-to-understand objects of ridicule, has been a challenge for the *heute show*. To avoid further distractions, the show has a clear focus on national German politics, touching rarely on international topics, and only then usually from a

German point of view, looking at the German coverage of the event, or talking about the involvement of German politicians in the story.

Much more than its American role model, it criticizes and mimics politicians and parties across the political spectrum. The political opinions voiced appear to place it more on the left side of the political spectrum, but it displays no signs of loyalty towards the Social Democrats or even the Greens. In contrast to Jon Stewart, no specific political agenda has been discernible so far. However, the Free Democratic Party (FDP, the small partner of the CDU in government, which clearly favors free markets and privatization) has become a bit of a pet topic: It has been an easy target having lost its political representatives and voter support in breathtaking speed over the last year. At the same time the *heute show* provided some substantial criticism of the special (business) interest group legislation introduced by the party, such as a reduction in the value-added tax rate for the hotel industry.

While there has been much speculation and outrage about a possible "Americanization" of German politics and political communication, in fact most scholars would refute that an actual "Americanization" has occurred, German political campaigning and campaign coverage appears to have adopted some American strategies, but only with significant modifications (e.g. Reinemann & Wilke, 2007; Schulz, 2005). As Pfetsch (2001) points out, German political communication culture remains much less media-centered compared to the US. Party block voting is still the norm in German parliaments, hence politicians have far less need to mobilize public opinion concerning specific issues outside of election times. Intense mediated policy controversies are therefore rare, leaving the *heute show*, again, with less enticing fodder.

Similarly despite a perceived increase in "politainment" (i.e. the blurring of lines between politics and entertainment), this phenomenon has not yet reached American levels. While in the US the participation of politicians in entertainment talk shows like Oprah or late night talk shows has become an accepted part of political campaigning, in Germany,

politicians, media, and the public continue to have strong reservations. At the time of their appearance in popular entertainment programs, the popularity of politicians may increase temporarily, but in the long run, their image has suffered. The most recent victim of this is the former vice chancellor Guido Westerwelle whose appearance on the German *Big Brother* in 2000 made him vulnerable to charges of triviality and likely contributed to his expeditious fall from grace a year after being appointed vice chancellor in 2010. Politics in Germany, so it seems, is still a "serious" business. This in turn helps explain the reluctance of German politicians to be associated with a satirical program. In addition to their fear of losing control over their image in non-staged interviews, the positive effect of such appearances is not yet clear.

It is for this reason that the producers of the *heute show* have not been able to integrate an interview with politicians in the show's regular set-up. So far there has only been one politician who dared to accept an invitation of the *heute show*. In the episode on May 13, 2011, Claudia Roth, head of the German Green Party and prominent member of the German parliament, was the first and so far only politician on the show. Her courage as a forerunner should not be overrated: Of all German parties, the politics of the Green party come probably closest to the opinions of the *heute show* and its viewers. In addition, the Greens had scored a major victory in a state election a few days before, becoming the strongest party in the large and prosperous state of Baden-Württemberg. She could thus expect kind treatment, and Oliver Welke most likely even exceeded her expectations. For most of the interview, he talked only about the fact that she was the only politician who would dare to appear on his show. He treated her with exaggerated hospitality, giving her a huge bouquet of roses, and offering her a clock radio for each politician she would be able to motivate to appear on his show. Unfortunately, this uber-hospitality prevented Welke from raising any interesting issues with his guest.

The *heute show*'s Impact on German Politics, Media, and Viewers

The anchor Oliver Welke rather downplays the political aspirations of his show: "The common denominator of the show is more the spoofing of the powerful to the point where it hurts" (cited in Brauck, 2009)[5]. And so far not much of an impact on national or regional politics has been discernible. The show has only reacted to political events and issues without setting an agenda of its own. Still both the political and the media system in Germany attribute it with an enormous amount of potential – often with direct references to its American role model. As a result, German politicians have become very much aware of the show. For instance, Finance Minister Philip Rösler's parliamentary speech on nuclear energy was countered by a member of parliament with the statement, "Mr. Rösler, you will find your speech line-by-line on the *heute show*" (Deutscher Bundestag, 2011: 12977). While in earlier episodes some of the lesser known and thus less sophisticated politicians appear to be somewhat flattered when asked a question by one of the most important German channels on their way to the Bundestag or at party conventions, recently the rising awareness of the show among politicians and society in general is clearly visible in a growing reluctance to participate in ad-hoc interviews, sometimes a distinct "Don't talk to them, they do satire!" can be heard in the background.

In the media the response to the first episodes was rather skeptical if not negative. Welke was considered to be a "case of blatant miscasting", the show itself the "a classical boss's brainchild that just doesn't work" (Mohr, 2009). This melted away quickly to a rather benevolent and enthusiastic reception. After only two years on the air, the *heute show* is now the standard that newly introduced formats have to measure up to. Some of the support, however, seems to be linked to a sense that the German public sphere needs a political satire

[5] "Der gemeinsame Nenner ist eher die Veralberung der Macht - bis an die Schmerzgrenze." Translation by authors.

show, needs its own Jon Stewart. Thus even though the *heute show* may not be as good as hoped for, it is at the moment seen as the best there is to be had in Germany.

The awards the *heute show* has received indicate how the show is not only perceived as a comedy, but also a journalistic format. It won the *Deutscher Comedypreis* ("German Comedy Award") twice, and in 2010 won the *Deutscher Fernsehpreis* ("German Television Award") and the *Grimme Preis*, the most prestigious award in the category of entertainment. But its team also was awarded the *Journalist of the Year* Award in 2010, because the *heute show*, according to the jury, is living proof that journalism and entertainment works on TV, without getting stuck in cheap jokes and puns (Disselhoff, 2010).

Outside the media critique columns, its impact has been rather small. There are some examples of successful sketches going viral or being taken up in other "serious" programs. For example, the show's attempt to explain the validity of the different German value-added tax rates following the significant tax reduction for the hotel industry was picked up for an episode of the political talk show *Hart aber fair* on public channel ARD.

When the *heute show* started in 2009, it had promising ratings, with around 2 million viewers and a market share of around 15%. In the following months, the ratings dropped to about 1 to 1.5 million viewers per episode and market shares with single-digit percentages. Recently, the show has been able to break the 2 million mark again, even though the Friday night slot is a heavily contested time slot for TV comedy, and the overall trend indicates a steady growth of the audience (Markhauser, 2011).

Like *The Daily Show*, the *heute show* works with a live audience which adds atmosphere, laughter, and applause to the show. This is the most immediate involvement of the audience. However, the *heute show* goes beyond this. While on the official website of ZDF only the last episode of the show can be accessed (with up to 400,000 downloads per episode), older episodes and highlights of them can easily be found on YouTube, where ZDF officially uploads some episodes on its YouTube comedy channel *ZDFlachba*r

("ZDFlaughable") and fans upload clips of the show. These uploads are often commented on by YouTube users, sometimes resulting in several hundred, in rare cases even more than a thousand comments on an episode or a segment of it.

In general, comments on social media sites such as YouTube and Facebook show that many viewers appreciate the quality of the *heute show*. At the same time, the show is often compared to *The Daily Show*, and in such comparisons, the *heute show* is usually seen as the inferior copy of the original. Interestingly, while some see the show's weakness in the fact that it is too close to the American original, others complain that it is not living up to the standards set by *The Daily Show*, a comparison that is also often made in media articles on the *heute show*. For example, one critic of the show writes that while *The Daily Show* employs three non-white correspondents, the *heute show* only features white men and two (white) women (Wagner, 2010)

Overall, the favorite part of the *heute show* seems to be the segments featuring reporter Sonneborn and his bitingly sarcastic reports on serious issues, thereby not only making a mockery of the portrayed figures, but also of the journalists whom Sonneborn is parodying. Many comments agree that with this kind of coverage, and with the kind of humor that is being used in the show in general, the TV station is attracting a younger audience than with its traditional news shows, a development greatly welcomed by both the younger audience and the TV producers.

As the American original is known and immediately accessible not only to a selected few elites, but to a larger segment of the population, the *heute show* therefore is not judged on its own merits, but also in comparison to its US role model. This has important consequences for its evaluation by the viewers. On the one hand there may be consistent disappointment, as the *heute show* cannot live up to *The Daily Show*. It is a weekly not daily program, its staff is minimal compared to Jon Stewart's, it is not yet as established in the political system, it has less of a political impact, no political guests, and no political agenda. At the moment Oliver

Welke and his team would never be able to mobilize 215,000 "fans" for a rally to restore sanity or any other concern. On the other hand, knowledge of *The Daily Show* greatly increases the credibility and political weight of the show. People aware of the political impact of *The Daily Show* cannot dismiss *heute show* as "just" a television show, for they know how much political clout this type of format can achieve.

Conclusion: Potential and Effects of News Parody in Germany

Political satire has a long tradition in Germany, mostly in the form of political cabaret, originally taking place in small theaters and clubs, and then transferred to television. However, it is a dated format that has not adapted well to the opportunities the medium of television has to offer, nor to a younger generation's habits of media use. Given this, the adaptation of *The Daily Show* may have come at an opportune moment. Whether it is due to the continuous import of American shows and formats, or to the easy accessibility of American culture on the internet, German viewers seem by now to have become quite "Americanized" in their tastes and thus more open to the treatment of "serious" matters in a more humorous way. The German understanding of political satire appears to be in the process of converging with the US and British approach to political satire: As a more playful and less grave satirical treatment of politics becomes possible, laughter moves to the center of German political satire, drawing in a wider pool of television viewers and recruiting new audiences to public political contestation.

The celebration of play and laughter in the *heute show* may, however, partially explain why the show's impact on politics has been minimal so far. For the moment one can note only an awareness of the show and its political potential among politicians, media critics, and parts of the population. Whether this awareness will transform into real political clout, will strongly depend on the decision of Oliver Welke and his team to develop a clearer political profile and champion specific issues. For concerning the sense of earnestness and mission, it is actually

Jon Stewart who comes currently closer to the traditional German understanding of political satire. If the *heute show* can hence develop the right formula – retaining its current level of playfulness and laughter, while finding a persistent, authentic line of attack and judgment, without falling back into the patterns of the old German political cabaret by sounding preachy and self-righteous – it can become a considerable force in the German public sphere.

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